Although feed consistency is paramount to production, Doug Syryczuk recently switched to using some canola as a protein source.

Nutrition profile for a high-performing Wisconsin herd

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On 850 acres in Lubin, Wisconsin, Doug Syryczuk milks 300 Holstein cows and raises alfalfa (300 acres) and brown midrib (BMR) corn silage. He says, "Granted, there is a little tonnage difference in the BMR from conventional hybrids, but digestibility on the BMR is, I think, one of the big differences in keeping our production where it's at."

Where is his herd's milk production? Averaging 95 pounds – with 3.85 percent butterfat and 3.41 percent protein – using no rBST since June 2016, with a somatic cell count of 90,000 with twice-a-day milkings in a double-eight parallel parlor.

The three Cs

Happy as the cows apparently are, BMR corn silage doesn't tell whole story. Syryczuk says, "I always say it's the three Cs: consistency, comfort and calm. We don't change our ration at all – maybe we'll make tweaks a little here or there to our ration, but we haven't changed it over the last two or three years hardly at all. I just feel that cows don't like change, so the more we can keep everything the same, the better they do."

Currently, Syryczuk is feeding about 122 pounds of as-fed feeds – about 56 percent dry matter – around 58 pounds per day of corn silage, 25 pounds per day of alfalfa haylage, 8 pounds of oatlage and 32 to 33 pounds of mixed feed that includes protein and ground dry corn.

In lieu of lower commodity prices, one of the more recent changes was to use some canola instead of all soybean meal as a protein source. Generally, however, Syryczuk says he doesn't change the ration to accommodate lower priced feeds. He says, "We try to keep the ration the same and weather the storm. I feel that if we make changes just according to commodity pricing, you're going to see milk production, reproduction and health deficiencies right away. We just try to maintain the ration – it's just

one thing I'm a firm believer on, that if you do make changes, then in six to nine months I think you feel the effects more than the immediate payback in lower pricing."

The canola switch was Dan's idea.

Dan Tanata is a nutritionist, feed and grain manager at Medford Cooperative Inc., in Medford, Wisconsin. He's part of Syryczuk's recipe for consistency. "One thing I think dairy farmers overreact on is their feed consultants or nutritionists," Syryczuk says. "We've been working with ours now for 18 years. That goes back to our consistency pattern of not changing the ration."

Tanata says most of the credit for Syryczuk's nutrition program success should be given to his forage program. "Doug focuses on high-quality forage, and that's key to good nutrition," he says. "We push those cows, because they can be pushed, but all the pieces of the puzzle have to be there. High-producing cows need high-quality forage to drive intake, solid nutrition programs, good genetics and excellent management, such as Doug's 'three Cs.' Doug's puzzle is complete."

Tanata and Syryczuk have a face-to-face meeting once a month when they "walk the cows." They look at changes in feed components, assess metabolic incidences, check forages, talk about ingredients – what might be a good buy – or industry issues. Of course, they text or otherwise communicate two or three times a week in addition.

In assessing components, Tanata says they perform a least-cost analysis frequently, but continually push for production. They balance amino acid profiles by using a rumen-protected lysine (AjiPro-L) and synthetic methionine at levels high enough for production and in correct proportion to themselves and metabolizable protein. Tanata says this has been crucial to their success, and says, "Doug has really good cows that need a high plain of nutrition to meet their genetic potential." They use soy-based protein sources, but recently added canola based on pricing – about a 2-to-1 ratio of soy-based protein to canola. Tanata says, "We don't use blood meal for lysine or methionine, as it varies by 30 percent from one batch to another, and with dried distillers' grains, we'd have to worry about mycotoxins and free fatty acids."

Tanata says Syryczuk also has an aggressive dry cow nutrition program to balance amino acids and DCAD levels, which has resulted in very few fresh cow problems. Tanata says, "We think the 2 dollars per head per day spent on a solid dry cow program pays off in fresh cow health and production. I really believe balanced dry cow rations are the beginning of the next lactation, not the end of the prior lactation."

Doug Syryczuk feeds about 122 pounds of as-fed feeds, including corn silage, alfalfa haylage, oatlage and mixed feed.

Communication

Syryczuk says, “I’m more of a believer of just keeping that communication line as open both ways, and I think that’s why I get a long with [Dan] so well. He listens to my feedback and we don’t overreact on stuff,” whether it involves herd health, new feed additives or new ways of doing things. If one of them has an idea, they communicate it to the other, and then they usually “sit on it” a few days before they sit down and discuss it. This gives each of them time to think through the pros and cons of the idea.

Using canola was one such example. Syryczuk says, “We had been using soybean meal or a bypass soy product for so long, and then Dan brought up the option of using canola. The first thing I always question is what’s it going to do to production? Money ... you know sometimes you’re not going to gain enough by saving a few cents, so I sat and thought about it awhile. Then we had a discussion on how that would affect production.”

Tanata says, “It’s great working with Doug. I love working with people who know what they want.” He adds, “It’s all about meeting the producer’s goals together. Doug trusts his veterinarian, loan officer, accountant, agronomist and his nutritionist. He works with a really good team of people. He’s too busy to research everything, but he’s smart and informed and makes solid decisions – informed decisions. Then he expects us to do our jobs.”

High-producing herds are not only the result of nutrition, says Doug Syryczuk. He places high emphasis on "comfort" and "calm" as elements of successful herd management. *Photos by Mary Hookham.*

Beyond nutrition

Syryczuk says the ration isn’t wholly accredited for his herd’s success. He believes the other two Cs – comfort and calm – are also important factors. Comfort, for Syryczuk’s herd, goes beyond sand bedding to include “understanding the cow and how they react to the things you do change. Some cows don’t like bigger groups, some cows like smaller groups – just little things like that,” he says. It also includes cow handling – letting cows do what they want to do on their time, not pushing them too fast. Syryczuk also gives most of the vaccinations in the parlor, so he doesn’t have to keep the cows in headlocks too long.

Calmness is the third success factor. Syryczuk says, “At the dairy, we just try to be calm – in the person’s attitude, staying calm and not getting excited has a lot to do with this. The cows can sense tension of a person – if a person is agitated they’re going to be yelling a little bit louder or their actions are faster. Just staying calm is the goal, then the cows stay calm.”

To communicate that to his team, Syryczuk tries first to demonstrate calmness in his own actions. He says, “The biggest thing is they’re watching me. If they see me calm and not overreacting to stuff, they’re more calm.”

Beyond the Cs of consistency, comfort and calm, Syryczuk attributes his high-production herd to genetics. Since 2002, he has used embryo flushing. After determining the top 15 percent of the breed sires, he uses pounds of protein and pounds of milk as selection criteria for breeding. He estimates 95 percent of the bulls he uses are selected on a genomic basis.

In January 2016, Grassland Dairy, the cooperative that markets Syryczuk’s milk, sent producers a letter saying they would no longer take rBST milk. Syryczuk says he immediately began weaning the herd from rBST (which was only about 25 percent of the cows), and the herd has been off it completely since June 2016. Since then milk production hasn’t dropped at all. He says, “I think it’s part of a better management – keeping your cows’ days open number lower has worked well. But if the cows are already giving me 95 pounds of milk, how much more can I expect out of them?”

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